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ABSTRACT

This case study of a biracial student who was actually pushed out from the regular school system focuses on the student's perceived reality. The theory supporting the study is Labeling Theory, which asserts that the way in which a student is labeled is dependent on the social context of the student. The subject, a biracial 14-year-old in an alternative school in Tennessee, had been expelled from her regular eighth-grade class because of her disruptive behavior. The student recounts examples of racial discrimination by teachers and other students at the predominantly white school to which she had been assigned, and the behavior of classmates who would set her up for confrontations. Following her transfer to the alternative school, the student reverted to being the cooperative and able student she had been before her enrollment in the predominantly white school. Important to the history of this student is that when she attended a neighborhood school close to the housing project in which she lived, she was not labeled a troublemaker. When she was accepted, she was not forced to behave in a rebellious way. Her experiences highlight the importance of teacher sensitivity to student circumstances. An interview transcript is appended. (Contains 56 references.) (SLD)

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ED 375 213

A CASE STUDY OF A BI-RACIAL STUDENT AT-RISK

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INTRODUCTION

Data presented in this paper were obtained during a research project on students at-risk of dropping out of school. Theory supporting the original study was that of Symbolic Interactionism (Mead, 1934) whereby a student's meaning of school is acquired through social interaction. The research question stated in the original study was: How do students who are pushed out from the regular education classroom describe key events in their retrospective life histories that affect their in-school performance? It was assumed that the key events would be school related events that changed a student's meaning perspective from "I like school" of the elementary school student to the "School is not for me" meaning perspective voiced by the pushout.

Theory supporting this paper was that of Labeling Theory (Schur, 1971) which takes the following symbolic interactionist point of view: "At the heart of the labeling approach is an emphasis on process; deviance is viewed not as a static entity but rather as a continuously shared and reshaped *outcome* of dynamic processes of social interaction" (Blumer, 1969, pp. 62, 65, 66 as quoted by Schur, p.8). The emphasis in Schur's theory was on the "audience", defined by (1) society at large, (2) a person's peers, and (3) official organizational agents of control. The issues became those within the social context; labeling an individual and its consequences in interpersonal relations, stereotyping, self concept and role engulfment. Labeling Theory is tied to this study in the Conclusions section, page10.

ASSUMPTIONS OF THE ORIGINAL STUDY

In this study, it was assumed that:

1. A naturalistic approach using repeated, in-depth conversational type interviews was a sound research method for determining the student's "truth."

2. The student's truth was accepted as her perceived reality.

3. The findings of this study were not generalizable to a wider population, but provided rich description from one student's perspective.

4. This participant from the Alternative Center for Learning (A.C.L.), Knoxville, Tennessee was, in fact, a "pushout," rather than dropout, since she had been expelled or had received long-term suspension from the regular education classroom.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

The symbolic interactionist is interested in questions such as the following:

> 1. How do people define themselves, others, their settings, and their activities?
> 2. How do people's definitions and perspectives develop and change?
> 3. What is the fit between different perspectives held by different people?
> 4. What is the fit between people's perspectives and their activities? (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984, p. 136).

I assumed that this pushout had a personal distorting lens that allowed her to interpret her school experience in a very different manner than would a teacher, a school administrator, or a parent. By allowing this student to tell a personal story of "What's going on here?," her interpretation of in-school interaction revealed how she derived meaning

about herself and "school." I was not interested in the absolute truth of a situation. Rather, I focused on determining the subject's view of the truth as a means to understanding her meaning perspective. It was assumed that the way in which this student interpreted a social action and stored that action in memory was a result of interactive experience.

A step-by-step description of the methodology can be found in the dissertation completed at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1993 entitled, A Study of Four Student Pushouts from the Perspective of Four Sociological Theories (Kennedy, 1993). The data used for this paper came from one-on-one private interviews conducted at the A.C.L The interviews were taped and transcribed word for word. During the interview process, the student became the authority in her own retrospective educational life history, and the interviewer took the role of listener. Howard Becker (1986) described the role of researcher in sociological life histories as follows:

> The sociologist who gathers a life history takes steps to ensure that it covers everything we want to know, that no important fact or event is slighted, that what purports to be factual squares with available evidence and that the subject's interpretations are honestly given. The sociologist keeps the subject oriented to the questions sociology is interested in, asks him about events that require amplification, tries to make the story told jibe with matters of official record and with material furnished by others familiar with the person, event, or place being described. He keeps the game honest for us (p. 15).

Because the alternative school had been identified in the earlier study by Kronick and Hargis (1990), the Human Subjects Committee at the university would not allow taped interviews of teachers, counselors or

principal. I was allowed to ask yes or no questions of the above staff in order to verify information given in the private interviews. The student's records verified the extreme numbers of expulsions during her attendance at Madison School.

PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION

Iesha (pseudonym) was a 14 year old student attending an alternative school in Tennessee. She had jet black hair, nicely styled, sparkling black eyes, light brown skin, a small gold leaf in her left nostril. She was average height and size. She was highly verbal telling her stories with the visual details of an artist. Self descriptive statements, giving insight into Iesha's meaning perspective representing her school experience from kindergarten through six months of 8th grade, can be found in the appendix.

She had attended school only 54 days during the previous school year due to expulsions based on her behavior which was characterized as violent and unruly. She had been passed to the next grade and court ordered to the alternative school for the next academic year (1991-92). She lived in a housing project with her mother who is white. Her father is African American and lived in Ohio. They were now divorced. During the first five years of her educational life, Iesha spent the fall of each year in Ohio schools and the spring of each year in Tennessee schools. Since that time, she had attended school in Tennessee.

IESHA'S MEANING PERSPECTIVE

Iesha's early meaning perspective concerning her social identity was more that of any person growing up in a housing project rather than that of an African-American (Even though African American is acknowledged as

the descriptor of choice, I will use Iesha's term "Black" throughout the paper).

R (researcher): Can you tell me about your 5th grade teacher and why you liked her? Why was she different from other teachers?

I (Iesha): Well, she, you know, (was) trusting and honest and helped us out because **she was once from the Projects too**. And she understood what we was going through and all the pressure we had on us in the Projects. And she used to keep our courage up high and tell us we could do it. You know, she did not think low of us because she was from the Projects and she was about to get her Master's Degree. You know, everybody listen to her when other people who were not from the Projects, they would say, "Well, I understand", but they don't understand because they haven't been there. You know, she had been there. We listened to her 'cause we could relate to her, but all the other teachers could not do that. I mean, she use to keep our hopes up high and tell us everyone had special needs in some areas. So everybody in her class did not feel like a failure. So you know, it was really good for all of us.

R: How many were in your class then?

I: About 23 in that class. And you know, didn't no whites get treated better than Blacks. It was all equal because we all came from the same place. We all lived in the Projects. We all grew up together and everybody knew everybody in the whole school. More than likely the whole school knew every-each one- 'cause we all grew up in that area together.

Iesha identified her teachers as either Black or white only in answer to specific questions about race. Her early school experience was positive except for the fact that, for five years, kindergarten through fourth grade, she spent the fall of each year until Christmas with her father in Ohio and the remaining school year in Tennessee. She compared her favorite teacher from the Projects to one she identified as "Mrs. rich preppy". In Iesha's words, "How could (she) relate to someone who doesn't

even in their whole life get what (her) kids get in a couple of years?" Iesha described this teacher as having a father who was a plastic surgeon and a husband who was a "real big lawyer". "Nobody wanted to hear that, I mean someone who has been there from the Projects could relate better with what you are saying than someone who has come from a very rich family."

Except for occational hassles at school, Iesha blended with those from the neighborhood. She was not labeled a trouble maker, nor was she perceived to be either unruly or violent. The neighborhood school was closed and in school year 1990-91, Iesha was bused to a school that was predominantly white, middle class in population. Iesha was in 7th grade. She was quickly labeled unruly and violent and threatened with 24 hour mental health treatment which to Iesha meant forced separation from her family. During an entire school year at her new school, Iesha was expelled for all but 54 days. In asking her to describe how the fights began, she said about herself, "I just cannot stand nobody talking about the color somebody is. And they just kept on . . and they knew that I, **it was my quick point**". In Iesha's words, "(T)he school was full of racial".

She spoke of students coming close to her to "make Black people jokes". One teacher was reported as having said, "You Blacks don't get on my bad side, 'cause I don't like Niggers". When Iesha reacted and was taken to the principal's office, the principal was informed that Iesha had started the trouble. "When I told the principal what she (the teacher) said, they did not want to believe me. The whole class heard it and they said they heard it, but they (school administrators) did not want to believe us."

As an example of her experience, she answered my question in the following way::

R: Tell me what somebody would say to you that triggered the "fight" on your part.

I: OK, there was this boy, we were in science and it was the last period of the day. And this boy said, "Iesha." I said, "What?" He said, "How come you are Black and your mom is white?" It just stunned me for a minute and I didn't pay no attention to him. I said, "Cause my dad is Black." He said, "Your mom is a Nigger Lover?." And I just seen a chair that looked handy and so I just picked it up and started throwing them at him. And the teacher tried to grab me and I smacked him with a book. . .I just cannot stand nobody talking about the color somebody is.

I: I mean, I, just when somebody say something about me I don't like . . .at first I just look at them and start laughing. And then I start getting real mad. And the next thing I know I be yelling and then I end up hitting them.

R: Do you make a decision to hit them or . . .how does that happen?

I: I don't think. **I mean I have no control over myself.** It is like it is not me in my body. I have no control of myself.

Iesha described three patterns of behavior that she felt worked against her:

1. The other students, once they discovered her "quick point", would set her up for suspension or expulsion from school by making racial remarks and then reporting that Iesha started an incident.

2. The school authorities were not interested in her side of a story. They would first assign her the number of days of expulsion and then ask her if she had anything to say.

3. The school refused to assign her placement in the alternative setting even though both she and her mother requested such placement.

I: I mean they just would not let me out. It was like, well, if

we let someone go, it will get us a bad rep (reputation). So they just kept me there and using me like an experiment, talking about they was putting in all this counseling stuff. They going to see if this counseling can work with me. And then they use it on other students. I said, "I am not an experiment." And they just use to make me mad. Have me running around and then finally at the end of the year, they was like, "Well, I hope you come back with a better attitude next year." I said, "I am not coming back next year." And then my probation officer, she said that she did not want me back at Madison. And a court ordered me and only reason I was allowed back in Madison was to go get my referral sheet and all my suspension records. And I had to carry it to my probation officer and then bring them over here (the alternative school). They said it would be the best place for me.

It was reported by the alternative school staff and principal that Iesha had not had one unruly incident in the alternative school setting since arriving there six months earlier. They described Iesha as a model student. Furthermore, the alternative school principal was one and the same from Iesha's neighborhood school before the busing took place. This principal had been placed at the alternative school after Iesha's neighborhood school closed. The principal reported that she would vouch for everything Iesha had described to me. She believed sincerely that Iesha told the truth. Iesha's teacher, school counselor and principal as well as Iesha's mother believed that Iesha's representation was honest.

R: Was 5th grade the last grade that you liked?

I: No, 6th grade was.

R: And why did you stop liking school between sixth and seventh?

I: Well, because when I went to Madison it was just . .

R: That was the difference?

I: Yeah.

R. You left (your neighborhood) school in the sixth grade and tried to do seventh at Madison. And seventh was where you had 54 days in school and the rest of them outside of school? And then this fall you started at the alternative school?

I: Yeah.

R: So that is your educational life history?

I: Yeah.

RESULTS

Iesha's themes were:

1. Her seventh grade school was "racial".

2. Students set her up with Black remarks once they discovered her "quick point".

3. Teachers at Madison were prejudiced.

4. Authorities were not interested in "her side of the story".

5. Madison ignored her referral request fearing a "bad rep." for dealing with racial issues.

I asked Iesha to pretend she were principal of Madison and asked her what she would do differently. Her responses were as follows taken as excerpts from the transcription:

1. I would use conflict resolution to sort out conflicts.
2. I would talk with all teachers and tell them that they would have to treat all students fairly, no matter what color, race, wealth or - (unclear on tape).
3. I would expect white students to welcome the Blacks with open arms.
4. I would have a talk with the Black students and tell them they

need to treat the whites fairly and give them a chance.
5. If kids need help on their work, I would have time set aside each day where the teacher would be there to help them.
6. If a teacher didn't treat the kids fairly, I would investigate and see really what happened.
7. I would cut the cost on school activities; cheerleading would not be $500.
8. I would give everybody a fair chance.

CONCLUSIONS

This study supports Schur's (1971) Labeling Theory in that the way in which a student is labeled, ie, violent and unruly in this case, was dependent upon the social context of the student. In analyzing Iesha's life history in regard to school interaction, an important finding was that while Iesha attended a neighborhood school close to the Projects, she was not considered a troublemaker. Her neighborhood school was closed, and she was forced to attend Madison which she considered the rich kid's school. Her behavior was rebellious, unruly, uncontrollable and she was expelled many more days than she attended school that year. After she was court ordered to the Alternative Learning Center, she once again became the model student.

Since Labeling Theory evolved from that of Symbolic Interactionism whereby the continuous interaction between the individual's behavior and the responses of others dictated how a person feels about oneself; one's identity and self-concept are assumed to be affected by the reactions of others. As long as Iesha was accepted as an insider, she was not forced to respond in a rebellious way. Once Iesha was perceived or labeled by others as an outsider, ie: poor and Black, Iesha's behavior changed dramatically. It appeared that Iesha's positive image of self demanded that she rise up using violent behavior in an effort to defend the Black

culture against racial slurs by whites.

Iesha was labelled a "Black" in a white, rich kid's school. This stereotyping called "pictures in our minds" was explained by Walter Lippmann in 1922 and quoted from Schur (1971) as follows:

> . . .We do not first see, then define, we define first and then see. . . We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them and those preconceptions, **unless education has made us acutely aware** (emphasis mine), goverr deeply the whole process of perception. They mark out certain objects as familiar or strange, emphasizing the difference, so that the slightly familiar is seen as very familiar, and the somewhat strange as sharply alien (p. 40).

The whole process of perception on the part of Iesha as she entered Madison, and the perception on the part of Madison students to an "outsider" especially a Black, low socio-economic status outsider, appear to be the crux of the negative social interaction that took place. Iesha, in reporting the prejudiced comments by the one teacher and the racial slurs perpetuated by fellow student, learned that a person can be stereotyped merely by the color of one's skin. This kind of stereotyping based upon one personal characteristic of being either white or Black, places the other on the defensive in social interaction.

Labeling Theory also described role engulfment in the form of immersion in a deviant subculture, as a possible condition of the individual's developing a strong deviant self-concept (Schur, 1971). Iesha's identity with gangs and gang culture in the Projects appeared to

place her in the adversarial position of defending African-American and/or low socio-economic meaning systems that were contrasted by Iesha herself, from the white middle class standards evidenced at Madison; standards that Iesha found offensive. Again, what came into play was the "looking glass self." Iesha very quickly became aware that she was perceived as the "outsider" by others at Madison, and the prejudice she experienced did not make her feel good about herself. In terms of Symbolic Interactionism from W. I Thomas, the prejudice Iesha perceived to be present was real in its consequences for her.

DISCUSSION

In reading Iesha's description of her varied school experiences, of her early love of school and her later meaning perspective change to that of "School is not for me", several questions arise as a result of the data. They are as follows:

Why were there no methods of conflict resolution utilized by school authorities whereby both sides of a story could be heard?

> I: (Speaking about the alternative school) Well, for one thing there is less people. And everybody knows everybody because there is not so many people. If you have something wrong with someone, you have someone right there you can go and talk to. You all two can get together and settle it. In regular school, you can't do that. And I mean, can work things out easier because there are less people.
>
> R: Would teachers listen to you at Madison if you went to them? Do you think people hear what you say?
>
> I: Yeah, you know, they understand (at the alternative school). The kids here. . . are here because they have problems and I think they (the teachers) understand that- - that is why they listen to what we say and try to help us. But at Madison, they just looked over us.

Why was a student retained in a situation even after many requests for a different placement were made by student, parent and counselors? It took a court order for Iesha to attain a school placement, such as that of the alternative school, where individual and group counseling is conducted on a regular basis for students with similar problems.

> I: It did not start until last year at Madison and when I went to the mental health center. They were recommending me (to the alternative school) but Madison wouldn't accept. They (the school administrators) said that they thought I - - they could help me better than the alternative school would; they could work it out with me. And it kept on continuing and continuing. I kept getting into fights and arguing with the teachers and - -

How can school administrators ignore complaints about racial remarks and racial prejudice when ongoing incidents occur in certain classrooms? Iesha reported that at the beginning of the school year in one class, the teacher announced, "You Blacks don't get on my bad side, 'cause I don't like Niggers."

> R: Was there any reason for her to make a statement like that?
>
> I: They said she also made it the year before.
>
> R: At the very beginning of the school year, that was the announcement that she made in front of the class?
>
> I: They said she made it (the announcement) last year and there was a big thing about it and the principal still didn't believe the kids. So they said there was nothing that was did about it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Reviewing the data collected from one biracial student's perceived meaning change derived from her experience of "school", several recommendations can be made as follows:

1. It is imperative that colleges of education teach teachers entering the field about sensitivity to cultural diversity in the classroom.

2. It is imperative that teaching interns experience cultural diversity, especially that of low socio-economic communities, before they become certified professionals.

3. It is imperative that school authorities keep a watchful vigilance for outright prejudice in the classrooms. Principals and teachers alike must understand that once a student is labeled, others will initiate means to make the label come true. The student "wearing" the label has nothing to lose by "acting out" in behavior that is expected by others.

4. Conflict resolution can be utilized to deal with issues between two students (or between a student and a teacher) in an effort to "hear" all sides of a story before an expulsion decision is made.

5. It is imperative that teachers and school authorities be taught how to deal with cultural diversity issues which often involve issues of poverty, divorce, abuse and unemployment. All of these issues place a student at-risk of dropping out of school and at-risk of becoming an economic burden to society through social welfare costs, or worse, through incarceration. It is past time to act: Teachers make a difference!

APPENDIX/TRANSCRIPT/IESHA
1-11-93

R: Can you remember when you first started school?

I: Yeah, I started school, I lived in Ohio. I remember back to kindergarten, and I know I was the biggest kid around. I was the boniest but I was the tallest out of all the class. I remember, I use to get picked on a lot because I was tallest. I had this teacher, Ms. Wilson (pseudonym). I never will forget her 'cause she was so sweet. She made kids stop picking on me, but I liked school then. I really did.

R: . . .(S)o, what about your fist grade teacher? Can you remember her?

I: Well, my first grade teacher in Ohio, her name was Ms. Woodard. She was the meanest lady I ever knew. She use to smack me on my hands with a ruler. And I hated for somebody to hit me. And I use to go home and tell mom she use to hit me with a ruler. My mom say, "What you do?" I say, I didn't do nothing, but me and this boy use to argue all the time, that she had me sitting by. She just act like she didn't like me and this little boy 'cause she use to spank us with a ruler on our hand. I use to cry all the time. She would say, "Big girls don't cry." I would say, "Well, I am not a big girl." And I mean she was one mean teacher. Then I was so happy when they said we were moving to Tennessee. I could get out that woman's class.

Iesha then spoke of two (first grade) teachers in Tennessee, one as "mean" and one as "really sweet". "And we use to have fun in class and everything." Iesha spoke of faking illness all the time so that she didn't have to go to school. "And then I failed (first grade); she failed me."

R: She failed you?

I: Yeah, 'cause I wouldn't never go to school. I use to say, "Oh, I got a stomach ache." and get them to carry me home and then I would tell my mom when I got home, "Mom, I am sick, I am sick." The next hour

I am outside playing. Then the next morning I say, "Mom, my stomach hurt." My mom . . .use to fall for it. But when I really did have a stomach ache, they did not believe me.

I: And then after they failed me, the next year, I made first honors for the whole year. And mom was wondering what is the big change. I mean, I had this sweet teacher named Ms. Lipton. I mean she was so sweet.

R: Which grade are we in now?

I: First again.

R: First in the North?

I: Yeah, when I moved to Ohio, I don't remember my teacher's name, but I know she was sweet, and I kept on making first honors and then I went up there 2nd grade and I don't remember my 2nd grade teacher, but I know, I remember I use to have fun in her class 'cause she use to bring us cookies and stuff everyday. I would say, mom, I love my teacher, I love my teacher. She said, yeah, 'cause she is giving you cookies, right. I would say, "No, I like her."

In 3rd grade, Iesha spoke of a controversy at school over whether she needed "Resource" or "Speech, Chapter 1." The other students made fun of her and said that she talked funny. . . ."(T)he Chapter I teacher said, "Why does she need to be in here, because she is above my grade level." . .

I: I would make all straight A's because I was working on a grade lower than what I knew. And she had me in Chapter 1 and the work was so easy. Then, in third grade, I was there half of the year. And I had this real sweet teacher, Ms. Frederick who still today . . . cause in third grade I started having problems with these . . .'cause my uncle got killed in a car wreck, then these boys use to come to school and say, "Your mom stinks and your uncle smells, your mom went to heaven and your uncle went to hell." It use to make me mad and I would get upset. . . . .fourth grade I already came down here

and that is where I got stuck.

R: What does getting stuck mean to you?

I: Stuck in this town!

R: You never got to go North again?

I: Yeah, during the summertime, but my mom was mad. . .(S)he said I am tired of her running up an' down this road. This school, that school, this school, that school. So I came back down here for 4th grade and I had this prejudiced teacher name, Ms Hooks.

Iesha described a teacher's favoritism against Iesha and her friend and favoritism toward two other girls Iesha called "snobs". Iesha did not identify color as a basis for the prejudice. She reported that 5th grade was okey except for a teacher's helper who did not want Iesha and her friend to be together, because her friend was white. She continued to speak of her teachers as "sweet". She spoke of being evaluated about 5th grade as follows:

I: . . .Well, K had this really sweet teacher named Ms. Blank. . . . . (S)he do a grade evaluation to see what level they are on. Well, she did a 4th grade and I aced it, a 5th grade and I aced it and I aced the 6th grade. She said I only missed one on it so she said she was going to try 7th grade. 7th grade I missed 4 problems out of the whole test. And she called (my school) and asked them what happened. They said it must have been a mix up on the records. And I had not missed one day of school; they said I had missed all these days, but I hadn't. . . .My mom and them could not understand why they said I was working on this lower level and missing all these days when I didn't. Well, she had a group of kids, about 5 kids, who were working above their grade level. And we did not sit in regular desks; we had this big long table where we all worked together. And we use to do after school projects and stuff for her. And then I really get along with that school and I mean it was really fun. . . .I just could not

understand why they said I was working on 4th grade level when I could have been doing higher.

R: Was 5th grade the last grade that you liked?

I: No, 6th grade was.

R: And why did you stop liking school between sixth and seventh?

I: Well, because when I went to Madison, it was just ----

1-13-93

R: Can we list what that (teacher) favoritism was about?

I: Mostly about race and wealth.

I: Race and wealth, ok.

R: So did those favorite students sit around the teacher?

I: They sit anywhere they want to. They have a different desk everyday. Well, everytime I went into the class, she stuck me in the corner.

R: She told you where you had to sit?

I: Yeah. I wouldn't sit there.

R: So what happened if ---

I: I got took to the office.

R: And then once you got to the office, what happened?

I: They would either suspend me or give me in-school suspension.

Iesha described simply sleeping in class as her means of staying out of trouble that year. "Teachers try to wake me up, I say, 'Don't touch me. 'Cause if you don't say nothing to me, I ain't gonna say nothing to you.'"

R: Is that how you put 54 days in? Sleeping?

I: Uh huh.

R: . . .So that 54 days was kind of at the end of that year?

I: Yeah.

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